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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON SECURITY CONDITIONS IN NORTH SINAI

Classified by ECPO Minister-Counselor Michael Corbin for
Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (S/NF) Following the killing of two high-ranking police officials by what authorities call "Bedouin outcasts" in the Jabal Halal area, the Police-led terror sweep of the Sinai appears to have stalled amidst mined approaches and fierce resistance. Top Egyptian officials have begun to publicly question whether the mass arrests of Sinai Bedouins and other "hostile" security measures taken by authorities in the wake of the October 2004 Taba bombings have spurred terrorism in the region. Tourism in the region, however, appears poised to recover more quickly than expected. End summary.

Sweep Continues, Casualties Incurred

¶12. (SBU) The Egyptian police sweep of the northern Sinai in search of the perpetrators of the string of recent attacks in the peninsula has met fierce and lethal resistance. Beginning August 23, special-forces units of the Central Security forces, in conjunction with anti-terrorism and General Security units, launched raids in the mountainous areas around Jebal Halal, a 240 square kilometer area south of El Arish in the northern Sinai.

¶13. (C) Two days into the raid, a police armored vehicle traveling on a supply run struck a landmine, severely injuring three policemen and a Bedouin guide. On August 25, forces inspecting the scene of the previous day's blast detonated another concealed mine. The blast killed two senior police officials, Major-General Mahmoud Adel and Colonel Amr Abdel-Moneim, and wounded nine other police officers including what one report called the "head" of the special security services. Reports that the attacks spurred a retreat by police have been denied by security officials, who cited a necessary pause in operations to clear the area of mines. Anecdotal reports describe the police force as ill-equipped to face such a challenge, and say the pause in the onslaught was not only to clear the area of mines, but to request and receive the necessary equipment to do the job.

¶14. (U) Police have singled out Salem Khadr Al Shanoub, who they describe as a notorious weapons and drugs trafficker, as the ringleader of a group of "outcast" Bedouin tribesmen resisting in their mountain stronghold. Security officials state that most of the wanted Bedouin have been arrested or at least identified, despite reports of the August 28 escape of several suspects from police encirclement. North Sinai MP Mohamed Al-Kashef said that he was contacted by Shannoub who denied any involvement in the attacks.

¶15. (S/NF) Local contacts characterize the "outcast" Bedouins as those, who by their criminality on non-conformity to traditional Bedouin social norms, have been banished from permanent residence with the tribe. They feel that these outcasts are ripe for exploitation or indoctrination by extremist groups or ideologies which the Bedouin normally shun.

¶16. (U) According to Al-Kashef, investigations into the recent Sinai attacks have led to the arrest of approximately 700 individuals, with 500 still remaining in custody. Over 150 individuals were arrested in the week of the August 25 attack alone. Reports place the number of police engaged in the sweep at over 5,000.

Links to Other Blasts

¶17. (SBU) The parties responsible for the attacks, and their possible links with international terrorist organizations remains unclear. Ministry of Interior officials are exploring the links between the bombs used in the Taba, Sharm and El Gourah-MFO attacks, positing that they were of the same type and produced in the El Arish area. They describe the devices as "crude," being comprised of gasoline canisters and as-yet-unidentified explosive materials. However,

contradictory reports citing anonymous sources have described the types of explosives used as being sophisticated and new to Egypt. Officials publicly continue to lay the blame for the Sinai attacks on local elements, but some unnamed security sources in speaking to the international press have also claimed links to "outside" terrorist organizations.

PM Talks Roots of Sinai Terror

¶ 18. (U) PM Nazif was quoted in a recent New York Times piece as saying that the GOE was examining other "social" factors that may have spurred the latest attacks. These factors, such as the police response to the October 2004 Taba bombings where several thousand residents in the northern Sinai were arrested and held for questioning, could have spawned vengeance on the part of the aggrieved. Nazif has avoided directly criticizing the Ministry of the Interior, however. In a speech commemorating the death of the two police officials in Jabal Halal, Nazif praised the MOI's role in maintaining security and stability in the country. The PM also opined in his interview about the possibility of international involvement in the attacks, a theory at odds with predominant government position that the perpetrators were known and local.

Taba Trial

¶ 19. (U) On August 30, an Ismailiya State Security court judge postponed continuation of the Taba bombings trial until September 25-26, citing the need to call more witnesses. The adjournment came just two weeks after the resumption of the trial on August 14. The judge announced that the head of security of South Sinai and his aide must appear as witnesses before the court. The judge also called for an explanation of the failure of the Hilton hotel's CCTV monitoring system to record footage of the vehicle which struck the hotel.

Tourism/Economy

¶ 10. (U) Indicators continue to point to a healthy recovery for tourism in Sharm El Sheikh following the July 23 blasts. According to the Ministry of Tourism, the average occupancy rate, which dipped to 30 percent in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, has now bounced back to 62 percent. The Egyptian Tourism Federation reports that arrivals of Italians, traditionally the largest group of foreign visitors in August, outpaced departures by mid-month. International tour operators are reporting near-normal bookings to Sharm for European travelers. Tourist arrivals for July and August are up 24 percent on the same period last year.

¶ 11. (U) In Egypt overall, the Ministry forecasts 9 million visitors to the country by year-end, slightly lower than forecasts but an increase on the 8.1 million recorded on ¶ 2004.

¶ 12. (U) The Emergency Labor Welfare Fund, formed after the blasts to offset negative employment effects of the attacks, announced it will disburse a "first installment" sum of LE 800,000 (USD 139,000) to 3,468 beneficiaries.

Comment

¶ 13. (C) The laying of mines to target police represents an escalation on the part of the Bedouin, and one that the police appeared ill-prepared at first to counter. The question as to whether the Sinai terrorists are purely a home-grown phenomenon or directly linked to international terror networks looms large. The GOE would like the public focus to remain on the former theory, but this compels the leadership to address uncomfortable questions about prior police treatment of the Bedouins as a root cause. Nonetheless, the Egyptian assertion that the Sinai terrorists are purely homegrown and devoid of outside influence seems to be wearing thin. Reporting in other Embassy channels reinforces the impression that the campaign has not gone as planned for the police, and that additional government resources are being brought to bear. End comment.

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